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ABSTRACT

This booklet has been prepared to aid communities that wish to start Voluntary Action Centers. It is a digest of experience to date. The 10 questions answered in the booklet are as follows: (1) What is a Voluntary Action Center?; (2) What does a Voluntary Action Center do?; (3) Who can start a Voluntary Action Center?; (4) What is the usual process for starting a Voluntary Action Center?; (5) What is the relationship of the local center to other voluntary and volunteer-using agencies in the community? . . . and to local government?; (6) Who decides what the program of the local Voluntary Action Center will be?; (7) What is the operating structure of a Voluntary Action Center?; (8) What are the expenses involved in running a Voluntary Action Center?; (9) Does the National Center for Voluntary Action fund the local Centers?; and (10) What does the National Center do for the local centers? Brief descriptions of how Voluntary Action Centers have been started in Albany, N.Y., Albuquerque, New Mexico, Hartford, Connecticut, New York City, and Staunton, Virginia are available upon request to the National Center for Voluntary Action, 1735 Eye Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006; the names and addresses of Directors of Voluntary Action Centers in various areas are available from the same source. (Author/DB)

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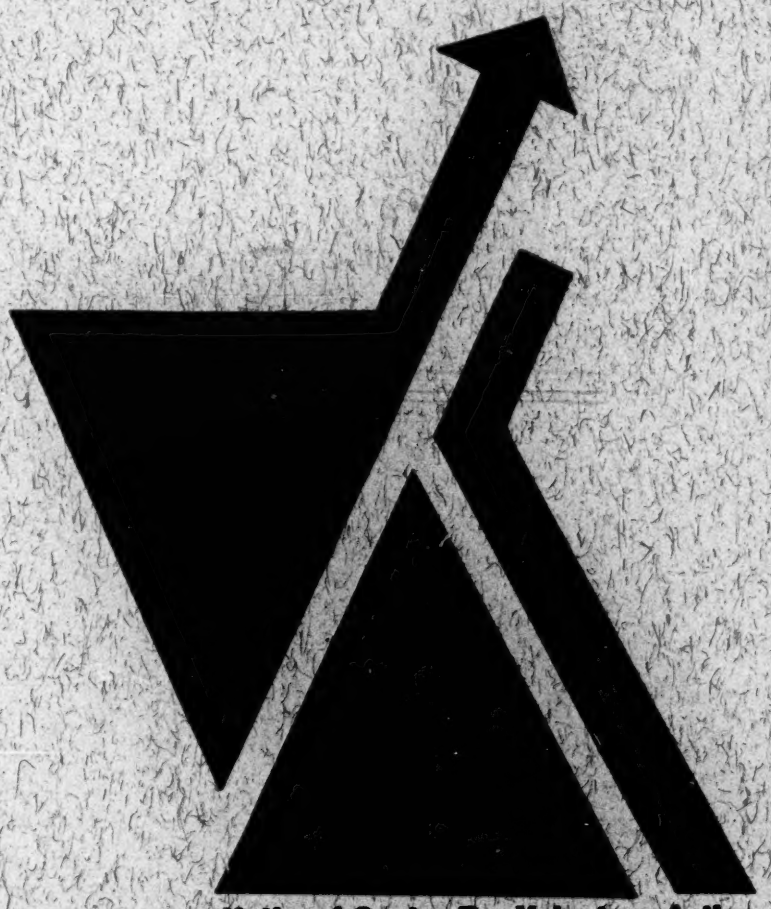
voluntary action center

guidelines



National Center For Voluntary Action

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THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR VOLUNTARY ACTION is an independent, non-political organization to work with other private sector agencies and with volunteers

- **to organize and support specific voluntary action programs in cooperation with other national agencies**

- **to link private sector volunteer programs and counterpart activities sponsored by government**

- **to provide information and guidance on voluntary action programs and methods . . .**

. . . all as the hub of a growing national network of locally based and locally controlled VOLUNTARY ACTION CENTERS.

Preface

The National Center for Voluntary Action is an independent, non-profit organization created to support volunteers and their service agencies, both locally and nationally.

The NCVA, as a national organization, works directly with major voluntary and volunteer-using agencies, with the national media and with the Federal government to promote and support voluntary action across the country.

But while the National Center is national in scope and resource, it is — and must be — local in impact.

The nation's volunteer spirit will be renewed through action in local communities, not in Washington. The community Voluntary Action Center — locally based and locally controlled — is the crucial ingredient in the total program of the National Center for Voluntary Action.

The National Center is committed to help establish a network of Voluntary Action Centers and to focus all of its energies on that immediate objective. A Task Force made up of Directors as well as national and regional staff is organized to work in at least 100 communities interested in forming local centers by December 31, 1971.

This booklet has been prepared to aid communities that wish to start Voluntary Action Centers. It is not a definitive manual, but is a digest of experience to date.

It is a booklet written — indeed a program designed — for people who believe that in a time of rapid social change, a strong initiative is needed to unclog the channels of people-to-people service.

THE LOCAL CENTER: TEN QUESTIONS

What is a Voluntary Action Center?

What does a Voluntary Action Center do?

Who can start a Voluntary Action Center?

What is the usual process for starting a Voluntary Action Center?

What is the relationship of the local center to other voluntary and volunteer-using agencies in the community? . . . and to local government?

Who decides what the program of the local Voluntary Action Center will be?

What is the operating structure of a Voluntary Action Center?

What are the expenses involved in running a Voluntary Action Center?

Does the National Center for Voluntary Action fund the local Centers?

What does the National Center do for the local centers?

WHAT IS A VOLUNTARY ACTION CENTER?

The idea of a Voluntary Action Center is a simple one: to create, in a community, one central agency to identify needs which volunteers can help meet — working individually or in groups — and then to put volunteers in touch with those needs.

To do its job of matching needs to resources, the Voluntary Action Center works directly with people who want to help in existing projects and with the agencies, institutions, and individuals that either need or place volunteers. But it also helps individuals and groups wishing to plan and mount new projects, and seeks out new volunteers. And it works to bring local leaders — from business and industry, education, government, emerging citizens groups — into a strong program of voluntary action with both range and staying power.

The most important features of the Voluntary Action Center are these:

- **The Voluntary Action Center is an advocate for all volunteers in the community and for all who need volunteers.** It is non-discriminatory and genuinely representative in the broadest sense, from its governing board to its everyday operating policy.

- **The Voluntary Action Center is a stimulator and sponsor of action.** It is a meeting place for volunteer "activists" in the community — for people who have seen a problem and who want to do something about it.

  The local center has the information that action-oriented people need: it keeps track of local needs and volunteer opportunities, knows of potential volunteers and usable resources, and stays in touch with community planners and government officials. It also has access, through the National Center's Clearinghouse in Washington, to information on thousands of successful volunteer projects across the country.

  The local center helps develop and support training programs to give action-oriented people the skills they need: it works, for example, with volunteer-using agencies and institutions to set up basic on-site orientation programs, or with community leaders to design workshop programs for specific areas of interest.

In short, the Voluntary Action Center is the place where energy, imagination and manpower can come together to help solve community problems. It risks occasional conflict and error to help resolve problems and get results.

- The Voluntary Action Center is part of a national network. Although the program of a local center is developed to meet the needs of the particular community, all of the local centers are affiliated with the National Center for Voluntary Action. They receive the support services described in this booklet. They share a common sense of participation in a growing national movement. Individual Voluntary Action Centers profit from the experience of other centers in similar towns or similar stages of development, as well as from the assistance of the National Center.

- Most of all, the Voluntary Action Center is a community commitment to step up what can be done to meet public problems through the volunteer initiatives of the private sector.

WHAT DOES A VOLUNTARY ACTION CENTER DO?

The basic function of a Voluntary Action Center is evident from what it is: it stimulates, plans, and coordinates voluntary action at the local level.

To carry out that mission, local Voluntary Action Centers seek to do most or all of the following:

- Identify community needs that may be met by volunteers (often by turning to other agencies that are already doing so) in cooperation with public and private planning or coordinating bodies.

- Keep an up-to-date inventory of needs or be certain this is being done elsewhere in the community and that the information is open to all.

- Identify the agencies best equipped to meet community needs and to offer meaningful tasks to volunteers.

- Reach potential volunteers (seeking especially to involve people who have not traditionally been volun-

teers) and put them in touch with jobs to be done or with agencies doing those jobs.

- Help volunteers get meaningful assignments by working to eliminate needless red tape and to change negative attitudes about volunteers' abilities to handle important work.

- Stimulate the design, planning and development of new projects, helping to expand the range of existing agencies and to form new groups as needed.

- Convene groups to bring concerted action to bear on priority projects.

- Help establish an Information and Referral Service or, if one already exists, help strengthen and broaden the mechanism for the entire community.

- Serve as counsellor and advocate for voluntary groups, established and newly emerging, seeking community support for new departures.

- Publicize achievements of volunteers and opportunities for service, working to focus attention on the values of citizen participation in community projects.

WHO CAN START A VOLUNTARY ACTION CENTER?

A Voluntary Action Center is a commitment of people in the com-
people in the community to people in the community. Accordingly, it may emerge through the efforts of an existing group — for example, a Volunteer Bureau, a Chamber of Commerce, Health & Welfare Council, a Model Cities Program, a CAP agency, or a local service club. Or it may be started by an ad hoc coalition of citizen volunteers, or by a group of citizens responding to a mayor or other municipal official.

In many cases, local citizens request the help of NCVA national or regional staff in starting the Voluntary Action Center. The National Center responds to these requests as quickly and positively as possible. But other

local centers come into being entirely through local initiatives and then affiliate with the National Center.

WHAT IS THE USUAL PROCESS FOR STARTING A VOLUNTARY ACTION CENTER?

In some communities, a Volunteer Bureau, a Health & Welfare Council, or some other volunteer coordinating group already offers a basic program and a skilled group of volunteer administrators. In others, a fresh initiative is necessary. But most communities go through all or some of the following basic steps:

- Form a small Steering Committee made up of people from established agencies as well as people who are not committed to existing programs or structures.

- Define the area to be served and ensure that the Steering Committee has a basic working knowledge of the area — for example, its agencies, institutions, and living patterns.

- Create a sub-committee to confer with local organizations that use volunteers and to identify probable sources of volunteers — service and other clubs, agencies, schools, churches, Urban Coalitions. (In some cases this information will already be assembled and available.)

- Meet with representatives of agencies, service clubs, women's civic groups, business and financial institutions, to assess potential interest and cooperation for the project.

- Work to involve officials of local government on the premise that the Voluntary Action Center should be a strong force in bringing the public and private sectors together to meet community needs.

- Evaluate findings to determine if community needs are sufficient and if there are enough agencies and

projects needing volunteers to justify formation of a Voluntary Action Center. (Experience shows that there will be enough volunteers if the needs are defined and if service opportunities are clear.)

- Build on the contacts of earlier meetings to establish broad community support. Continue to interview community leaders, explaining the program and identifying sources of help.

- If the Voluntary Action Center is not to be developed under the auspices of an existing agency, consider establishing a connection with a core agency in the town — e.g., Chamber of Commerce, Community Council, or Community Chest. (It may be advantageous to affiliate with one of these agencies.)

- Present a concrete plan to the community, or to whatever body has been authorized to make the decision, and move to create a formal structure with clear designations of responsibility.

At some point in the exploratory process, the Steering Committee should inform the National Center of the community's potential interest. A joint determination of the most useful role the National Center can perform in the development process can then be made.

When the community has decided to establish a Voluntary Action Center, the next step — a crucial one — is program planning and development. (Many beginning agencies worry about the recruitment of volunteers and devote most of their attention to it. It cannot be stressed too strongly that volunteers will respond. The great need is to ensure that the Voluntary Action Center will be ready with programs for volunteers, and a mechanism for placing them.

To develop a balanced program, the Steering Committee may wish to appoint Task Forces of interested citizens to work in the following areas:

- Finance: to develop budgets and a long-range, community-based funding program.

- Organization: to locate a Director and office space, and to recommend needed administrative and committee structures.

- "Job" Development: to work in the community at large — not just with the volunteer-using agencies — to develop greater volunteer opportunities.

- Agency Relations: to work closely with local agencies in establishing and shaping the Voluntary Action Center.

- Training: to work with agencies and other organizations that may be helpful — business, civic, government, educational — to develop volunteer skill and orientation programs.

- Volunteer Recruitment and Placement: to assess the need for volunteers, identify volunteers, and develop a placement policy or mechanism.

- Community Relations and Public Information: to promote and publicize the community volunteer program, making a particular effort to encourage the community to make greater use of volunteers.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE LOCAL CENTER TO OTHER VOLUNTARY AND VOLUNTEER USING AGENCIES IN THE COMMUNITY? . . . AND TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

Relationship to other agencies:

The Voluntary Action Center operates in a direct service relationship to existing agencies. It is not a substitute or replacement, but works to help agencies — public and private — do their jobs of recruiting and placing volunteers, developing greater opportunities for voluntary service, and meeting community needs.

A Voluntary Action Center should not be established in a community where it would duplicate the work of an existing, viable, volunteer coordinat-

ing body that has the policy of openness essential to a Voluntary Action Center. But the existing agency may wish to become a Voluntary Action Center and part of the national program. If so, it will receive the full cooperation of NCVA.

Relationship to government:

The Voluntary Action Center works in the community as a partner to local government, just as the National Center operates in partnership with the Federal government. The potential of this cooperation is great:

- to leverage public money with the time, energy and enthusiasm of private citizen volunteers;
- to broaden the reach and impact of voluntary action programs; and
- to increase citizen concern and participation in the work of government.

The Steering Committee or other group forming a local center should work from the beginning with local government officials to assess volunteer opportunities in government departments and projects, and also to identify government resources potentially available to the Voluntary Action Center — e.g., staffing help or advice, meeting rooms and office space, supplies and equipment.

The local center and local government should seek a working partnership that will be strong force in focusing community concerns and in mobilizing all of the community's resources — public and private — to support problem-solving volunteer programs.

The form of this public/private partnership will vary according to local circumstances. In many communities, the mayor, city manager, or first selectman will be a member of the Voluntary Action Center's Board of Directors. In this case, the partnership will be an informal one, allowing center staff and Board members to work with the official or his representatives to map out a cooperative plan of action. It is also possible that some local Voluntary Action Centers will be sponsored officially by local government, located in municipal offices, and jointly funded by government and private money.

WHO DECIDES WHAT THE PROGRAM OF THE LOCAL CENTER WILL BE?

The local Voluntary Action Center defines a program to fit the needs of its own community. While the National Center expects the local centers to use the common name in some form (for example: "Plainville Voluntary Action Center" or "Plainville Service Bureau: A Voluntary Action Center") as a condition of affiliation with the National Center, the use of the name is not meant to imply a sameness in every operating detail, but rather to confirm a shared commitment to further the scope and energy of voluntary action in America.

In short, the local center takes the form, and develops the voluntary action programs, that suit the style of the people who make it work and the composition of the community it serves.

There is no formal "accreditation policy" for local Voluntary Action Centers. In keeping with the notion of shared goals, the National Center will support and identify with any group that demonstrates:

- a commitment to help unclog the channels of voluntary service;
- a commitment to work with all volunteers, and to develop a governing and operating policy that is broadly representative of the community at large;
- a commitment to reach out to the community, and to develop a volunteer program of increasingly greater scope and reach; and
- a realistic program for community-based funding.

WHAT IS THE OPERATING STRUCTURE OF THE VOLUNTARY ACTION CENTER?

Most Voluntary Action Centers are operated in keeping with the following pattern or a variant of it:

Day-to-day operation is the responsibility of the Director. To ensure continuity and follow-through in an office that works with large numbers of people, it is advisable to make this a paid position. In some cases the Director

will have an assistant — or perhaps a number of volunteer assistants — and in almost every case there should be some provision for clerical help, volunteer or paid.

People with administrative responsibility — whether paid or volunteer — should be held to high standards of performance and accountability.

The Board of Directors, as the policy-making body to aid and guide the Director, should clearly reflect the Voluntary Action Center's commitment to serve the total community. The Board should also represent a balance of volunteer-using and volunteer-providing groups.

It is helpful to designate an Executive Committee of the Board if the Board itself is too large to be a working group. Executive Committee members assume a more active responsibility for such matters as operating policy, fund raising and community relations, pinpointing ways in which other members of the Board can help. In such a case, the Director is usually responsible to the Executive Committee.

In all communities, potential volunteers represent every level of skill and training. In situations where the Voluntary Action Center is involved in projects using the specialized skills of highly trained or "Executive" volunteers (e.g., housing construction or rehabilitation projects), it may be best to designate, as needed, Ad Hoc Project Chairmen who have the contacts and experience for such specialized work.

In communities where the Voluntary Action Center serves a large area — a county or state, or a major metropolitan area — the Board of Directors may also wish to consider setting up satellite centers to make the voluntary action program responsive to the needs and ideas of local communities and neighborhoods. The satellites rely on the resources of the main center and the guidance of its director, and they are likely to have volunteer staffing.

There may also be Standing Committees of the Board: Nominating, By-Laws, Finance, Communications, Training, Agency Relations, "Job" Development, Special Projects.

Most Voluntary Action Centers are incorporated. They operate in accordance with established by-laws and adopt standard accounting procedures. (These steps are particularly important if the local center is funded by a community agency or through a foundation or government grant.)

The organization chart on the following page may be of help in suggesting a possible structure for the local center. The National Center also has access to materials on committee structures, by-laws, and budgets. These are available on request. A state Bar Association or a local attorney can give information on state requirements for incorporation.

WHAT ARE THE EXPENSES INVOLVED IN RUNNING A VOLUNTARY ACTION CENTER?

The local nature of the Voluntary Action Center makes it impossible to forecast costs except through local analysis. The two basic items of expense will be **salaries and related benefits** (for the Director, other administrative staff and clerical help), and **operating expenses** (telephone and telegraph, postage, office supplies, office furniture and fixtures, printing, rent, utilities, general insurance, maintenance of equipment, and miscellaneous expenses).

A budgeted figure for travel and conference expenses for both staff and volunteers may also be appropriate. Other program expenses — such as consultants' fees, or the costs of a local awards program — will also be incurred as the Voluntary Action Center gets underway.

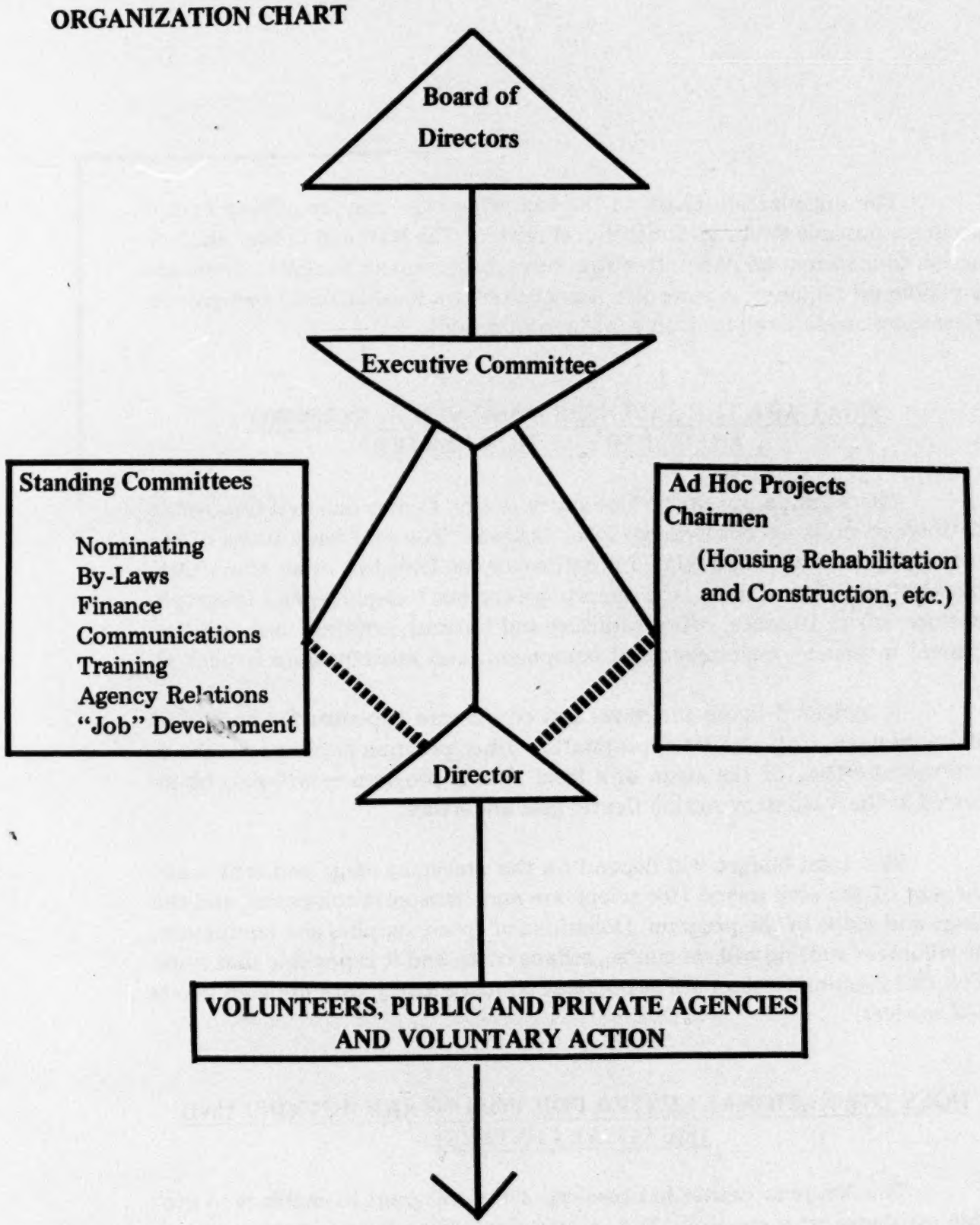
The total budget will depend on the prevailing wage and rent scale, the size of the area served (for telephone and transportation costs), and the range and scope of the program. Donations of space, supplies and equipment, or volunteer staffing will, of course, reduce costs, and it is possible that some Voluntary Action Centers will be operated almost entirely with donated goods and services.

DOES THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR VOLUNTARY ACTION FUND THE LOCAL CENTERS?

The National Center has received a Federal grant to enable it to provide assistance to some Voluntary Action Centers ready to foster innovative programs. Grants from the National Center will be of two sorts. Approximately twenty major grants (ranging from $10,000 - 40,000) will be made to support local projects designed to improve volunteer services (e.g., training, delivery systems, program design). These grants must be matched by the applicant Voluntary Action Center. In addition, there will be a number of smaller "seed money" grants ($2,000 - 10,000) to help local communities

VOLUNTARY ACTION CENTERS

ORGANIZATION CHART



establish Voluntary Action Centers, or to test innovative local programs with potential national adaptability.

Information on grant application procedures is available from the Field Operations Division of the National Center.

Except to the extent made possible through this government grant, the National Center is not a funding agency. As autonomous community agencies, the Voluntary Action Centers seek support within their own communities for facilities, staff salaries, or day-to-day operation. The local United Fund and other agencies should be consulted in the development of long range funding plans.

WHAT DOES THE NATIONAL CENTER DO FOR THE LOCAL CENTERS?

The National Center functions as a Voluntary Action Center at the national level — as the hub and energy center of a growing network of local units, as the coordinator of volunteer efforts that are directly national in scope, and as the national counterpart of local centers. It works to create a national identity for local volunteer programs and for the individual volunteers that participate in those programs.

The National Center also "services" the Voluntary Action Centers in the following ways:

- **Provides help in the start-up process** – in the form of on-the-spot staff aid in many cases and also as later needs arise in the community organization process.

- **Develops both information kits and staff help** for fund raising, communications, speech-making and "grantsmanship" at the local level.

- **Operates the Clearinghouse**, a data bank of information on local volunteer projects and programs. The Clearinghouse now has more than 4,000 projects on file and answers more than 250 inquiries a month by supplying information on how programs were established, how they operate, whom to contact for details.

- **Plans to develop a regional structure**, as more Voluntary Action Centers get underway (directors have already been appointed in Atlanta, Los Angeles and Chicago) and to provide regional conferences, training sessions, workshops and servicing.

In addition, the local centers benefit simply by being a part of a national enterprise. The National Center sponsors national programs — such as the current "Stop Rubella" campaign — and works to involve both agencies and individual volunteers in these programs at the local level.

The Center is currently developing a nationwide multi-media advertising program that will promote and stimulate voluntary action. It also publishes a monthly newsletter describing volunteer activities and sponsors a nationwide volunteer awards program. Bulk copies of the newsletter are available to local centers for distribution.

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The National Center has on file brief descriptions of how Voluntary Action Centers have been started in Albany, New York; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Hartford, Connecticut; New York City; and Staunton, Virginia.

The centers in Albany and Albuquerque grew out of existing Volunteer Bureaus. Hartford's Voluntary Action Center is sponsored by the Greater Hartford Chamber of Commerce, New York City's by the Mayor's Office, and Staunton's by Mary Baldwin College.

These descriptions are available upon request. We will also be happy to supply the names and addresses of Directors of Voluntary Action Centers in your areas.

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